

PLANET STORIES



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ALIEN EQUIVALENT

By RICHARD R. SMITH

Martians were weak, sensitive, a dying race, frail and impotent before the superiority of master Earthmen. Only in the sly and mentally skillful game of Duchal might sons of the red planet emerge gloriously from their shells.

CHESTER FARRELL emerged from the narrow alley and paused before the barbed wire fence.

Behind him, the Martian city was a maze of strange sounds, angular buildings, acrid odors and dark shadows.

Before him, beyond the fence, three spaceships pointed their bows toward a star-studded sky. The slender ships gleamed dully in the starlight as they rested on the red desert.

He touched the money in his pocket to reassure himself that at last, he had the fare for the trip to Earth.

His eyes scanned the heavens, searched for the bright light that was Earth.

Earth! In itself, the planet meant little to him. The seas, mountains, valleys and forests did not cause the burning desire inside him.

He closed his eyes and remembered a brick house in Cleveland and the brown-haired woman and chubby boy who lived there. He recalled slender, soft fingers that touched him gently and a small form that waddled uncertainly across their living room floor.

Three years ago, he had left Louise and Sammy on Earth. He had come to Mars to make a small fortune.

The dream had not materialized: the Mars Mining Corporation didn't want to pay their employees good salaries although the ores transported to Earth sold for tremendous profits. They paid their employees as little as possible.

It was simple: Governments wanted colonists on Mars to exploit the planet. Mars Mining wanted colonists to remain and operate their mines. The two groups, political

and business, collaborated and . . . while the trip to Mars cost only a hundred dollars, the return trip to Earth cost one thousand dollars.

Because of the high price of living on Mars and the low salaries, the fee was an encouragement to remain on the planet.

It had taken him three years to save enough money to rejoin his family.

Bitterness filled him as he studied the motionless ships. Convertible spaceships. The bulkheads inside the hull were collapsible and the space in a ship was constantly adjusted into different size storage holds and passenger compartments.

During the voyage to Earth, he would be the only passenger and would occupy a coffin-like compartment. Every other available foot of space would be filled with valuable ores.

When the ship returned to Mars, the passenger compartments would be spacious, luxurious and comfortable. They would be filled with hundreds of propaganda-fed, eager colonists who were unaware of the economic trap before them.

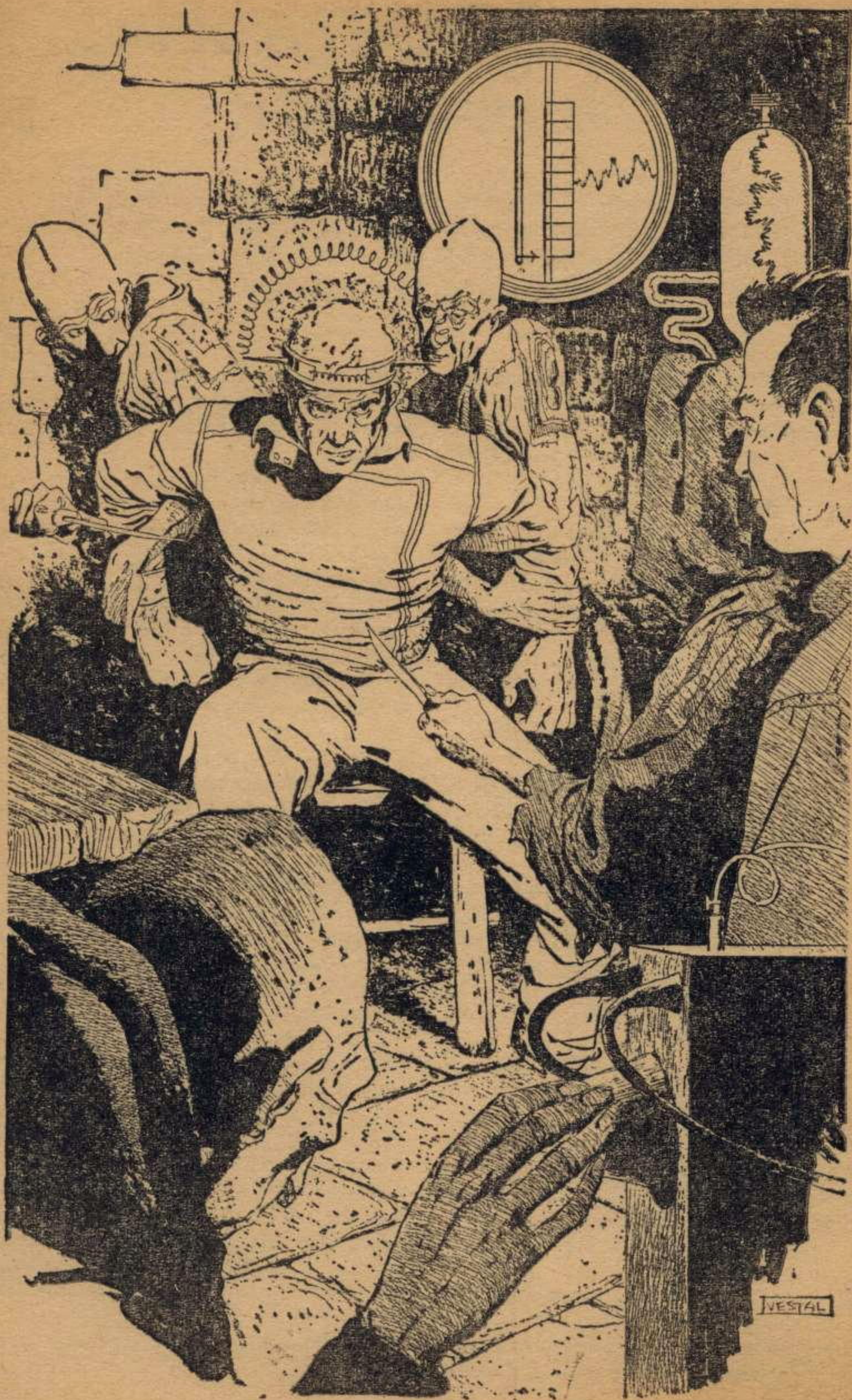
As he turned and followed the fence toward the spaceport's office buildings he heard the faint sounds behind him.

A whisper of movement across the red sand.

An animal?

He glanced uneasily at the tiny lights from the office buildings. In the thin atmosphere, light carried a long distance and was deceptive. The lights seemed near but he knew he still had a fifteen minute walk ahead of him.

Once more he heard the indefinable sound behind him.



VESTAL

His imagination?

A Martian?

An Earthman, a sound of harsh breathing informed him.

HE LEAPED to one side as the sounds neared his back.

Too late. Something crashed into the side of his head and bright lights danced gaily inside his skull.

He fell and rolled frantically across the soft sand.

As he scrambled to his feet he saw his attacker, a husky, powerfully built man. A blackjack dangled loosely from a hand.

Before he could rise a knee struck him on the jaw. He sank to the ground.

The man was on him, pinning him to the sand.

Farrell's nostrils were filled with the man's acrid body odor.

A knife glittered in the starlight as it was pressed gently against his throat.

"Tell me where the money is," the man ordered. "It'll save time."

Too stunned to speak, Farrell nodded at his coat pocket.

The man removed the money and counted rapidly, somehow managing to keep the knife in his hand while he flipped the bills.

Satisfied, he stuffed the bills in a pocket and raised the knife for a fatal lunge.

His arms pinned at his sides by the man's knees, Farrell knew only one thing could save him: WORDS.

"I can get you five times that much," he said quickly, the words crowding each other in their haste.

It worked: the knife wavered, hesitated. If he had screamed, "Don't kill me!" he would have been killed instantly but the simple statement had aroused his assailant's curiosity.

"Five times that much?" the man repeated gruffly.

Phobos, the largest and closest of the two moons, moved visibly across the dark sky. Suddenly, they were no longer in the shadow of a building. Moonlight flowed across the man's face and for the first time, he saw his features.

He looked up at a rough, almost brutal face with thick lips, fierce eyes, blunt, broken nose and bushy eyebrows.

"Five thousand dollars," Farrell confirmed.

"Where?"

"Dankor city. You've heard of a Martian game called rhakal?"

He frowned. "Yeah, I heard of it. I also heard Earthmen don't win very often."

"I won," Farrell told him. "Five thousand. I spent most of it but I saved the thousand to go back to Earth. If you don't kill me, I'll win five thousand for you."

His adversary grinned wryly and lowered the knife toward Farrell's throat. "This sounds like a trick."

"Trick? How can I trick you? Dankor is off limits to Earthmen. You and I will be the only—"

The man cocked his head and asked, "You have any Martian friends in Dankor?"

Farrell laughed at the thought, "Martian friends?"

Some of the wariness left the other's face.

Everyone knew no Earthman had a Martian friend. The Martians were a fading but proud race. They resented Earthmen and submitted bitterly to their presence. Martians did not associate with Earthmen. To do so would mean loss of social standing and almost always loss of their lives by the hand of some fanatical anti-Earth group.

Martians submitted to the invasion of their planet by colonists because they had no choice: they were few in number, a weak, dying race. Inwardly, they hated Earthmen and, given the chance, would rid Mars of all colonists.

While his antagonist considered the offer, Farrell's mind whirled rapidly. How could he escape? His body was trapped beneath the man's weight, unable to move. Call for help? He quickly discarded the idea: on one side was a Martian city and on the other was the spaceport. The group of crude stone buildings were inhabited by aliens. Martians might come and watch him die if he called for help but they'd never try to save him. The spaceport was deserted except for the empty, waiting spaceships and the office buildings were too far away for anyone to hear a cry.

He could do nothing.

"I'll give you a chance," his enemy said as he rose to his feet. "You win five thou-

sand for me and I'll let you keep the thousand and your life." He placed the knife in a sheath and drew a stubby revolver from a pocket. "If you make a wrong move, I'll blast you in half. I don't like to use this thing because it's noisy, but—" He waved the gun and the action seemed to complete the sentence in itself.

"LET'S take a taxi," Farrell suggested as he rose shakily and brushed red sand from his clothes.

"No."

"It'll take an hour to walk there," Farrell protested mildly.

"We'll walk," the man stated. "We'll walk and we'll take the most deserted streets."

Farrell led the way through the small Martian city that bordered the spaceport and across a narrow stretch of desert to Dankor canal.

At the canal, he turned and followed it northward, walking on the huge, weather-smoothed stones that formed one wall of the large waterway.

Thousands of feet below them, muddy water gurgled roaringly as it moved southward to the Martian farmlands. In the clear atmosphere, the opposite wall of the canal ten miles away was a thin, dark line.

"What's your name?" Farrell asked suddenly.

"Tharp."

"Where do you work?"

"None of your business."

They walked in silence, the two moons casting double shadows from each of their bodies.

With a sinking sensation in his stomach, Farrell realized the odds were against his seeing his family again.

"How did you learn I had the money?" Farrell asked.

Tharp grinned broadly. "When anyone makes a reservation on the flight to Earth, the news gets around. It got around to me." His laughter sounded brittle in the thin atmosphere.

After what seemed like years, they arrived at the outskirts of Dankor. Although it was off-limits, the police patrolled infrequently and even those patrols were publicly known schedules.

Dankor was a small cluster of low crumbling buildings. The streets were littered with filth and pale Martians dressed in rags shuffled aimlessly with blank eyes as if their world had already died.

Jars of brilliant fireflies on roof tops illuminated the village. Imprisoned in the transparent containers, the fluttering insects cast an eerie, pulsating glow on the dismal buildings.

Farrell paused before a thick wooden door and kicked it with his right foot. "The first time I came here," he explained, "I almost broke my knuckles before they heard me."

A few minutes later, the door opened.

"Come in," a bony, wizened Martian invited.

Tharp remained a few paces behind Farrell as they entered the room.

The stench of the place made their stomachs churn sickly.

A group of listless Martians sat in the center of the floor and watched a large cube-shaped object. Two Martians on opposite sides of the cube sat before small control panels.

The Earthmen watched as one Martian touched a button on his control panel. A green ball inside the cube rose a few inches.

The other Martian pushed a button and a brown ball at the top of the hollow cube dropped a few inches.

A thin Martian with grey hair and watery eyes asked, "You vish gamble?"

Farrell nodded his head affirmatively.

The Martian smiled weakly and inquired in broken English, "Vhot is vager? Monee or duchal?"

"What in hell is duchal?" Tharp asked.

"It's hard to explain," Farrell confessed. "But, we'll have to wait until those Marties are through and you'll see what duchal is when they finish."

Farrell squatted on the cold floor.

Tharp sat two yards to one side.

Silently they watched the Martian gamblers.

Several minutes later the emaciated aliens rose from their positions behind the small control boards.

"Is the game over?" Tharp asked.

"Yes. See the Martian with the green tunic? He's the one who lost the game. The

winner will receive a certain measure of duchal from him."

THEY watched intently as a strange machine was brought into the room. The two gamblers sat close to each other. A third Martian attached electrodes to their heads, then flipped a lever on the ancient, rusty machine.

The Martian who lost the game grimaced with pain.

A needle on the machine's single dial moved all the way to the right, then quickly returned to its original position.

An expression of joy spread the victor's thin lips into a wide smile.

A few seconds later, the electrodes were removed from their heads.

Tharp grunted his bafflement.

"Duchal," Farrell explained quickly, "means an expression of sorrow or pain. By means of that machine, the winner was able to receive in his brain the sensation of the loser's physical and mental agony at losing the game."

"That's what they were betting?" Tharp asked unbelievably.

"Yes. It's the same principle as humans who play games merely for the disappointed expression on the loser's face. The Martians do it a little differently: they have a machine that transmits the loser's pain into the victor's brain. The Martians are constructed in such a way that the agony of another person, implanted in their minds, is very pleasant to them."

"They must be crazy!"

Farrell shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe. Anyway, you have a choice. You can bet the thousand dollars or a certain amount of duchal."

"If we bet duchal and lost, we'd only have to pay the Martians a little . . . sensation of agony at losing the game?"

"Right."

Tharp laughed. "Hell, let's bet duchal. That'd be better than losing a thousand bucks if we should lose the game." He slipped his hand into a pocket and the cloth bulged in Farrell's direction. "And we'd better win!"

What's the difference? Farrell thought. *If we win or lose, you'll kill me. You can't leave me alive to report you to the police!*

"You can play the game," Farrell suggested. "I'll tell you what buttons to push."

"Okay. Tell the Martians we want to bet an amount of duchal worth five thousand. How much would that be on the dial on that gimmick?"

Farrell pointed at the graduation to the extreme right of the dial. "See that line? That would be worth five thousand in duchal. The same amount the Martian bet."

Tharp smiled as he remembered how easily the Martian gambler had paid that amount of duchal. If they lost the game, he'd have no trouble paying the gambling debt.

"Five thousand," Farrell told the waiting Martian. "We'll bet duchal."

The Martian smiled happily, disappeared for a few minutes and returned with a large bag.

Without ceremony he spilled the contents on the stone floor.

Tharp gasped when he saw the golden earrings, cups, anklets, rings and bracelets studded with diamonds. They were easily worth more than eight thousand dollars.

"Why the hell are they living in dumps like this when they have that kind of stuff? They could buy—" He hesitated as if the incompleted sentence indicated an infinite list of articles.

"It means nothing to them," Farrell explained. "They have a different monetary system. Most Martians are so poor, even the rich ones can't buy anything more valuable than food, clothes and shelter. And the Martians are too stubborn to trade with Earthmen."

He reflected idly that on all of Mars the only place where the two races associated was in gambling rooms like this. Even there, the Martians' attitude was stiff and business-like.

The group of aliens shuffled about uneasily, impatient for the game to begin.

"You ready to start?" Farrell asked.

"Sure."

"THE object of the game is to get those balls at the top of the cube to the bottom level. The Martian will try to get the ones at the bottom to the top. The balls are governed by the control panels. It's like three dimension Chinese checkers."

"Sasush rhakol," a Martian said loudly.

"The game has started. Push the top green button."

Tharp thrust with a grimy finger.

The game lasted several minutes. Each time it was their turn to move, Farrell told Tharp what button to push. Even while the game progressed, the husky man watched Farrell out of the corners of his eyes. Farrell realized that even with the distraction of the game, he'd have no chance to launch a surprise attack on his enemy.

Finally the Martian gambler rose. His colorless lips spread in a wide grin of anticipation.

"We lost!" Tharp exclaimed.

Farrell agreed, "We lost. Anyway, all we lost was a little duchal."

The Martians gathered around the two Earthmen; attached electrodes from the alien machine to Tharp's head.

Three minutes later, Tharp still sat with the electrodes attached to his skull. The Martians were impatient.

"What's the matter?" Tharp inquired angrily. "The game between the Martians, it only took the loser a few seconds to pay the duchal!"

"That's right," Farrell agreed. "But look at the dial."

Tharp stared at the motionless instrument.

"Duchal is an expression of mental or physical agony," Farrell reminded him. "Concentrate and feel sorry you lost."

He assumed a thoughtful expression. The indicator wavered slightly.

"Not so good. See, there are ten graduations on the dial. The needle has to touch the tenth before you pay the amount of duchal you owe. So far, the needle hasn't passed the first graduation. In other words, you haven't paid a tenth of the duchal!"

Tharp drew his revolver.

The Martians did not like the sight of a gun in an Earthman's hand. They had no way of knowing that it was meant for Farrell and not themselves. A dozen aliens threw themselves on Tharp and quickly disarmed him.

Ten Martians held an outraged Tharp motionless while an eleventh removed alien

handcuffs from his tunic and placed pairs around his wrists and ankles.

Farrell recovered his money.

"Martians aren't thieves," he informed the angry man who struggled in vain at the metal bindings. "And therefore, they like to see everyone pay their debts. They'll keep you here until you pay the wager. You see, by being behind the control board and pushing the buttons, you're the one who has to pay the duchal although I told you what buttons to push."

"A trick!" Tharp screamed.

Tharp's face reddened. "You won't get far," he threatened. "I'll pay this duchal in a few minutes; they'll let me free and I'll—"

"You don't realize," Farrell interrupted, "Martians are sickly, sensitive people and they're adept at projecting sensations of agony from their brains. On the other hand, Earthmen are strong physically and know nothing about projecting physical or mental pain—"

He paused to watch three Martians who removed gleaming, sharp knives from their tunics.

They pressed the blades against Tharp's arms.

The knives cut through his coat, shirt and flesh. The cloth reddened quickly.

"They want their duchal payment," Farrell informed him. "They'll get it if they have to slice you to ribbons."

Tharp's wild eyes stared at the dial before him. The needle touched the second graduation, then settled to the "O" position.

"You see," Farrell continued, "it's a matter of equivalent. Earthmen are so strong, they have to really *suffer* physically before they can match a duchal payment that a Martian can create as easy as snapping his fingers!"

Once more, the glittering knives bit into Tharp's flesh.

He screamed with pain.

"Get help! Get help before they kill me!"

Farrell went for help.

But, once beyond the thick door that suddenly suffocated Tharp's shrill screams of pain, he didn't run for help.

He walked slowly.